



# Stillwater/Fallon/Anaho Island National Wildlife Refuge Complex Comprehensive Conservation Planning Update

July 2001  
Number 7

## Greetings

This is the seventh in a series of periodic planning updates from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to keep you informed of our progress as we finalize the Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge Complex (NWRC; Stillwater NWR, Fallon NWR, and Anaho Island NWR) Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP). The process continues toward completion of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and Record of Decision (ROD) as we move toward our ultimate goal of completing a CCP for managing Stillwater NWR Complex for the next 15 years.

## Where We've Been

Since our last planning update, distributed just prior to release of the Draft Stillwater NWRC Boundary Revision and CCP (Update #6, April 2000), we have received more than 1,000 comments on the Draft EIS, from 54 separate contributors. The draft was released April 12, 2000 with the original 60 day public comment period supplemented by two consecutive, 30 day extensions. This provided reviewers with nearly four months to comment on the Draft EIS. The scope and complexity of the comments received show how much you care about the refuge and your feedback has been greatly appreciated.

## Refuge News

### 2001 Spring Wings Bird Festival

Spring Wings is a celebration of the spring waterbird migration through the Lahontan Valley area and a promotional event for International Migratory Bird Day. This year's festival showed a 50% increase in participation, with many tours filled to capacity. John Acorn (The Nature Nut from Animal Planet fame) was the star attraction this year with kid-oriented walks, talks, and songs. Mr. Acorn (yes, his real name) was also the keynote speaker at the Saturday night banquet, and was touted as the most entertaining speaker we have had. Next year, Spring Wings Bird Festival will be a focus event for the National Wildlife Refuge System Centennial Celebration, and organizers look forward to the additional status with tremendous excitement. Look for the celebration to grow!

### 2001 Hunting Season

We would like to take this opportunity to address the rumor that because of the refuge's limited water supply, the Service will be forced to close the hunting season as occurred during 2000. As discussed in the water management section of this update (beginning on Page 3), we will apply our water to the sanctuary first. Once we have reached 3,000 acres in the sanctuary any additional water will be delivered to the hunt area. The **Service has no intention of closing the 2001 hunting season;** however, hunters should **anticipate extremely low or even no water in the hunt area.** Hunters are urged to contact the refuge office prior to making any arrangements for hunting trips to the refuge.

To gain a better understanding of your concerns, the Service held two open house workshops (one in Fallon and one in Reno) following release of the draft and met with any requesting individual or organization. We hope that this process has been beneficial to your understanding of the various action alternatives and the rationale for selecting Alternative C as the preferred alternative. This has certainly been a valuable learning experience for us.

### **How Your Comments are Being Incorporated in the Final EIS**

All of your comments have been reviewed and draft responses have been prepared for release in the Final EIS. Where possible, your suggestions will be included in the Final EIS and ROD. Considering the range of comments, and the fact that they were submitted by numerous individuals and organizations with differing views on some issues, it has become a challenge to find a compromise that first fulfills the purposes of Stillwater NWRC and the needs of wildlife and second, represents how you would like to see the refuge managed.

For example, some contributors would like to see the boundary of Stillwater NWR expanded to include all of the existing Stillwater NWR, Stillwater WMA, and Fallon NWR (Alternative D in the Draft EIS), while others would like to see no expansion (Alternative B). Similarly, some individuals would like us to manage for natural flows through Stillwater Marsh (Alternative D), while others would like to see us save our water until fall to maximize habitat availability for fall migratory waterbird use (Alternative B). While comments on these issues covered the full range of possible management alternatives presented in the Draft EIS, no other issue received as much attention or controversy as public use management.

### **Nevada Division of Wildlife Working Group**

To ensure that these issues were adequately addressed and that we fully understood commentors' concerns, the Nevada Division of Wildlife (NDOW) sponsored a working group consisting of most public use interest organizations submitting comments on the Draft CCP-EIS. Members included representatives from The Nevada Waterfowl Association, the Friends of Stillwater Coalition, the Lahontan Wetlands Coalition, the Lahontan Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Refuge Association, Churchill County, and the Nevada Game Commission, among others. The intention was to allow representatives of these groups to openly discuss issues, with refuge staff available to answer questions and clarify segments of the Draft CCP-EIS.

This working group met 12 times over a seven-month period and discussed refuge management topics ranging from water delivery strategies to environmental education. Group members reached agreement on most of the topics and the Service was asked to take a hard look at Working Group recommendations when revising the final EIS. The following sections include the suggestions submitted by the NDOW Working Group, by topic. These suggestions are within the scope of comments submitted during the public review process, as they relate to implementation of the Service's preferred Alternative C and are intended to fine-tune broad management approaches previously discussed in the Draft CCP-EIS.

#### **Stillwater NWRC Boundary**

While there was some disagreement among group members on whether we should increase, reduce, or maintain the preferred Alternative C boundary, the majority agreed with the Service proposal with a few modifications. The proposed boundary does not include the Indian Lakes region. Considering that the D-line canal,

which runs through this area, can be used to deliver prime water to the west side of the refuge, the group suggested that we obtain an easement and retain maintenance authority over the canal.

The group did not reach agreement on this issue.

### **Water Management**

The Service preferred Alternative C water management strategy is intended to mimic natural spring runoff from the Sierra Nevada while acknowledging that delivering water within the historic range of peak runoff (May to June) could potentially impact nesting water bird species. The process of high spring flows (spring pulse concept) is considered beneficial to wetland health because the high flows move salts to the northern units of the refuge, freshening the water in the system's lower wetland units. Fresher water should result in increased habitat diversity and the environmental conditions necessary to restore native vegetation species. Spring pulse water would be delivered to the refuge between March 15 and April 1, with anticipated flow rates of up to 250 cubic feet per second during this period.

Different group members commented that the Service would still be flooding nests with this approach; would be allowing wetland units to dry during hot summer months, thus, increasing the potential for botulism outbreaks; and would be using too much water during spring which could result in reduced habitat availability during fall. The Service response to these comments met with general group agreement; however, the remaining concern among group members was related to how the Service would implement the spring pulse strategy prior to completion of the water rights acquisition program.

The group provided the following for Service consideration. First, the group acknowledged that Service management will be directed at fulfilling refuge purposes, primarily, in this case, restoring and maintaining natural biological diversity. However, the group would like to see the proposed water management strategy initiated on an experimental basis, with monitoring used to determine whether the strategy is resulting in the desired outcome. Other considerations for Service review include:

1. Taking water only within the standard irrigation season (March 15 to November 15)
2. Conducting spring pulses through one of four identified flow corridors representing roughly 25% of refuge wetland units.
3. Initiating spring pulses only when the Service has 20,000 acre feet of prime water available for delivery within a given year.
4. Using up to 20% of available water for spring pulse flows.
5. Using remaining water for adaptive water management strategies, with existing habitat conditions and water availability weighing heavily on which units receive water for the remainder of the year.

In water short years, such as occurred in 2000 and anticipated to occur this year, the group proposed using water to first provide 3,000 acres of wetland habitat in the sanctuary, the next 3,000 acres in the hunt area, and remaining wetland acreage distributed equally between the sanctuary and hunt area. Under extreme conditions, defined as when the Service is projected to receive less than 10,000 to 14,000 acre feet of water, it was suggested that the Service meet with NDOW to discuss strategies to ensure that wildlife are adequately protected. Options could include limiting road or boating access, closing designated units, restricting times or days public use is allowed, or closing the refuge completely. The latter option would allow the Service to manage for the best possible habitat conditions, regardless of

whether units were located in the sanctuary, or whether the area is open to public use. The group reached agreement on all water management options discussed.

### **Non-consumptive Use Management (Wildlife Observation and Photography/ Environmental Education and Interpretation)**

In most cases, the working group agreed with Service recommendations offered in preferred Alternative C, option 2, including (Map 1 and inset 1 provided on page 6):

1. Establishment of a visitor center, environmental education facilities, and demonstration wetlands on the former Kent property near the town of Stillwater.
2. Development of a short auto-tour loop, complete with interpretive pull-outs and observation areas, at the southern end of the existing sanctuary.
3. Development of an interpretive trail and boardwalk at Stillwater Point Reservoir.
4. Retaining the existing auto tour loop through refuge wetland units located north of Division Road.
5. Development of a nature trail at the Alves Property and at Timber Lake.
6. Establishment of a canoe trail on Swan Lake Check.
7. Provision of photo blinds available by reservation.

Some group members suggested that the short auto tour loop through the existing sanctuary had the potential to disturb wildlife and proposed that the Service phase development and monitor the effects of development on wildlife during the different phases. The monitoring focus would be to determine whether potential wildlife impacts occur at acceptable levels, with unacceptable disturbance defined as a level where wildlife leave the sanctuary boundaries. Other group

members suggested that the proposed canoe trail be moved from Goose Lake (as presented in the Draft CCP-EIS) to Swan Lake Check. Agreement was reached on this topic.

### **Consumptive Use Management (Trapping, Fishing, and Hunting)**

Among the 1,004 comments received on the Draft CCP-EIS, no other topic received as many comments as management of trapping, fishing, hunting, and secondary uses of the National Wildlife Refuge System that support fishing and hunting. The group discussed their comments about preferred Alternative C, option 2, and reached agreement on several subtopics. The following are the results of these discussions.

#### **Trapping**

It is the Service perspective that recreational muskrat trapping, as had been allowed and was considered a purpose of the Stillwater Wildlife Management Area under the refuge's original establishing authority (1948 Tripartite Agreement) is no longer compatible with the new purposes of Stillwater NWR and is inconsistent with the definition and identification of priority wildlife dependent recreational uses provided in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (NWRISIA). However, the Service also recognizes that trapping can be a beneficial habitat management tool when used to accomplish specific, documented habitat management objectives.

Within this context, the working group provided the following suggestions to fine-tune trapping options presented in the Draft CCP-EIS including:

1. Trapping should be authorized for specific management purposes including muskrat and beaver population reduction to prevent disease outbreaks and for protection of

vegetation and infrastructure improvements such as levees and water control structures.

2. Trapping should primarily be accomplished by private citizens, awarded special use permits through competitive bid.

3. The Service may award special use permits noncompetitively based on trapper availability and expertise, or to respond to emergency situations.

4. The Service should recognize that trapping other species may be required for identified management purposes; however, trapping species other than muskrat or beaver should require preparation of an Environmental Assessment.

The Group reached agreement on this issue.

### **Fishing**

While identified as a wildlife-dependent priority public use in the NWRSA, the Service does not conclude that fishing on Stillwater NWRC conforms with the intent of this act. Reasons the Service would not allow fishing include:

1. Fishing would generally occur in delivery canals and more permanently wetted units that are also preferred waterbird nesting sites.

2. Management strategies to maintain productive marsh habitat and to sustain sport fisheries are in conflict, including controlling nonnative fish populations such as carp.

3. Fish in the Lahontan Valley contain high mercury concentrations. A health advisory recommending no fish consumption in the lower Carson River is in effect.

4. The only fish available is the introduced European carp. Other nonnative game fish occasionally enter refuge wetlands from Lahontan Reservoir but rarely survive the high salinity and reduced oxygen of Stillwater marsh waters.

5. There are other locations (including Indian Lakes, irrigation reservoirs, and

Lahontan Reservoir) in Lahontan Valley where fishing opportunity is available.

Based on comments received during the public comment period, many working group members did not agree with the Service position. The working group suggested that we consider allowing fishing on Lead Lake, West Marsh, delivery canals located north of Division Road, and the delivery canal from Stillwater Point Reservoir outlet to Structure Number 1. They further suggested that the Service develop special regulations to be adopted by reference into Nevada State regulations including: no boats or floating devices allowed and keeping management focused on requirements for migratory birds and not maintaining a sport fishery.

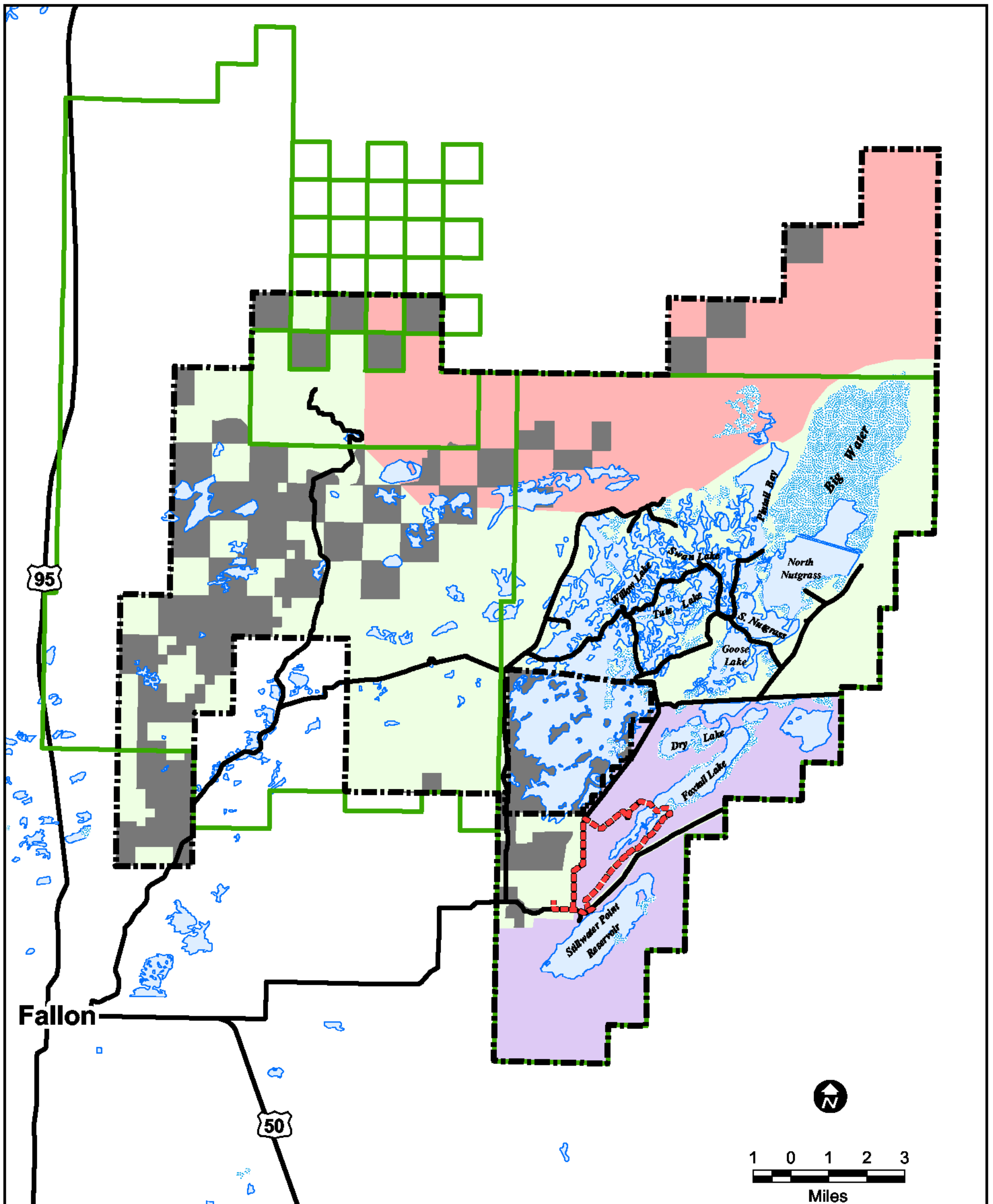
Group agreement was not reached on this topic.

### **Hunting**

The Service preferred Alternative C, option 2, would allow hunting for migratory waterfowl and California quail in the historic Stillwater Marsh, along D-line canal, and in selected areas of the lower Carson River corridor between the Alves property and Timber Lake. Hunting would be allowed seven days per week within State designated seasons with hunting by shotgun and nontoxic shot only. Hunting for other migratory, upland, and big game species would not be allowed.

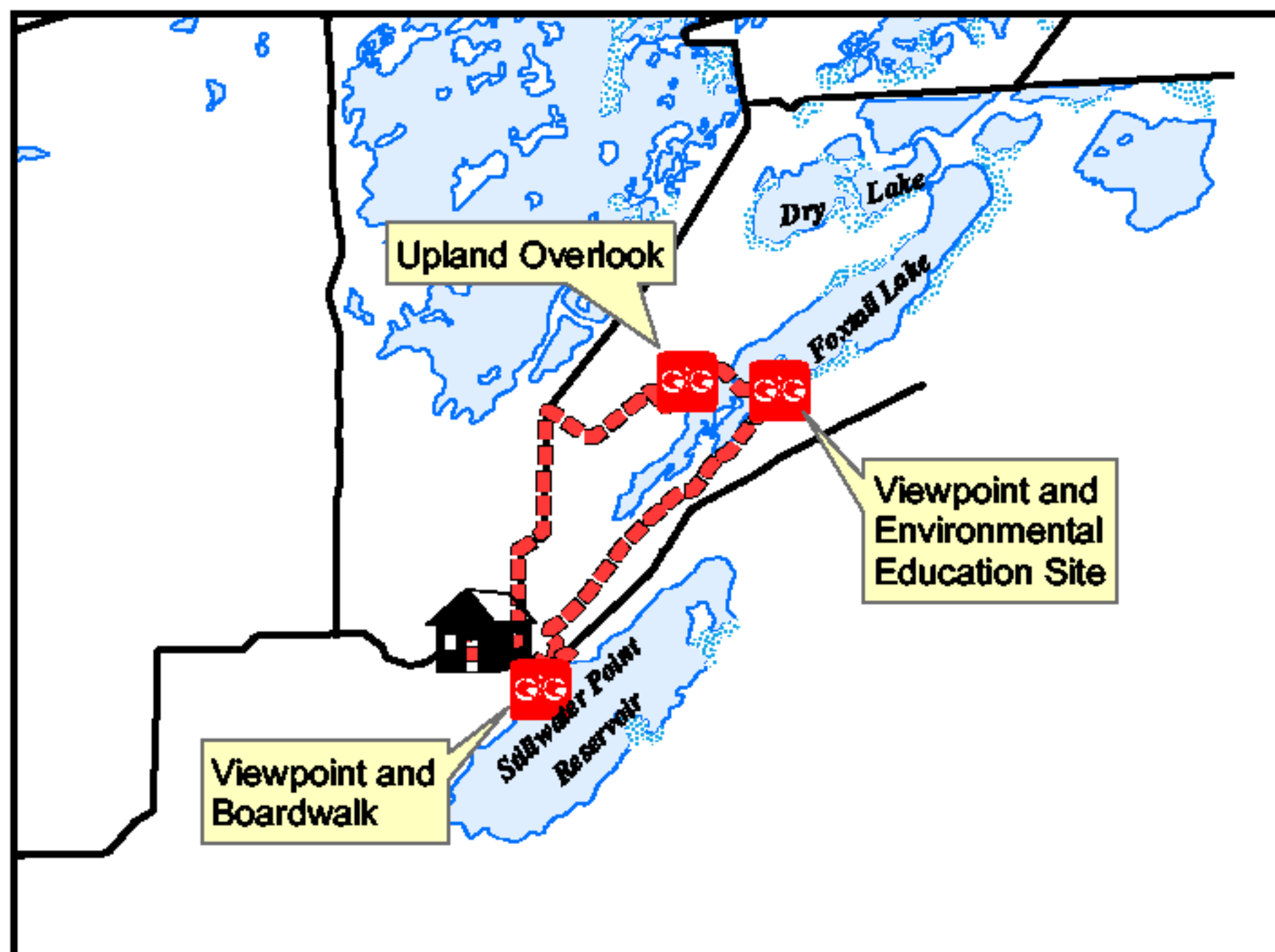
We received several comments on the Draft CCP-EIS stating that this strategy was overly restrictive while others suggested it was not restrictive enough based on the Refuge System mission and the NWRSA mandate to consider wildlife first. Working group discussions focused on a compromise position.

# Stillwater NWR CCP Public Use Options

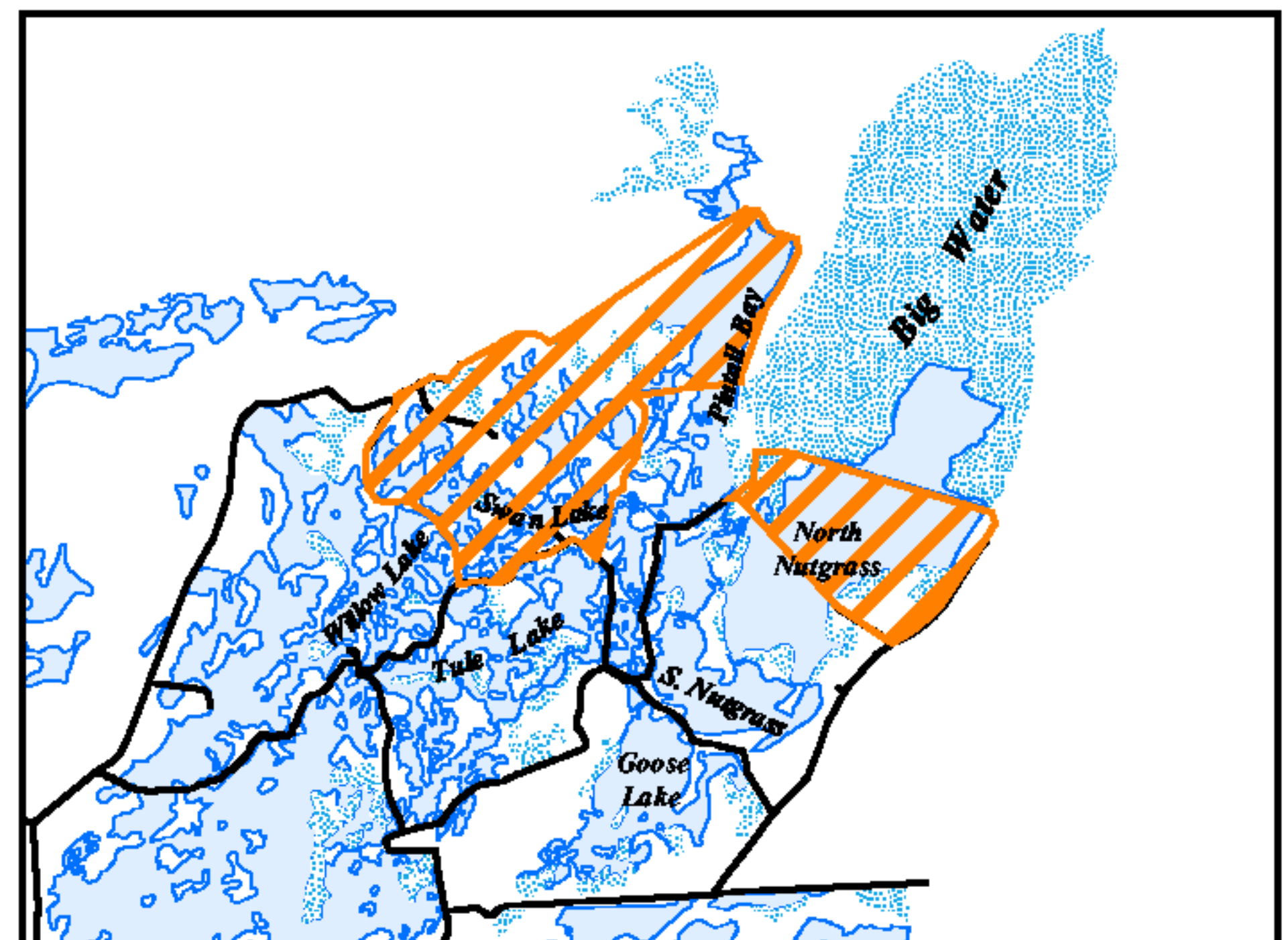


- |                                                                                     |                           |                                                                                     |                 |                                                                                       |                                 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
|  | Existing Complex Boundary |  | Private Lands   |  | Sanctuary                       |
|  | Alternative C Boundary    |  | Public Use Area |  | Potential Research Natural Area |

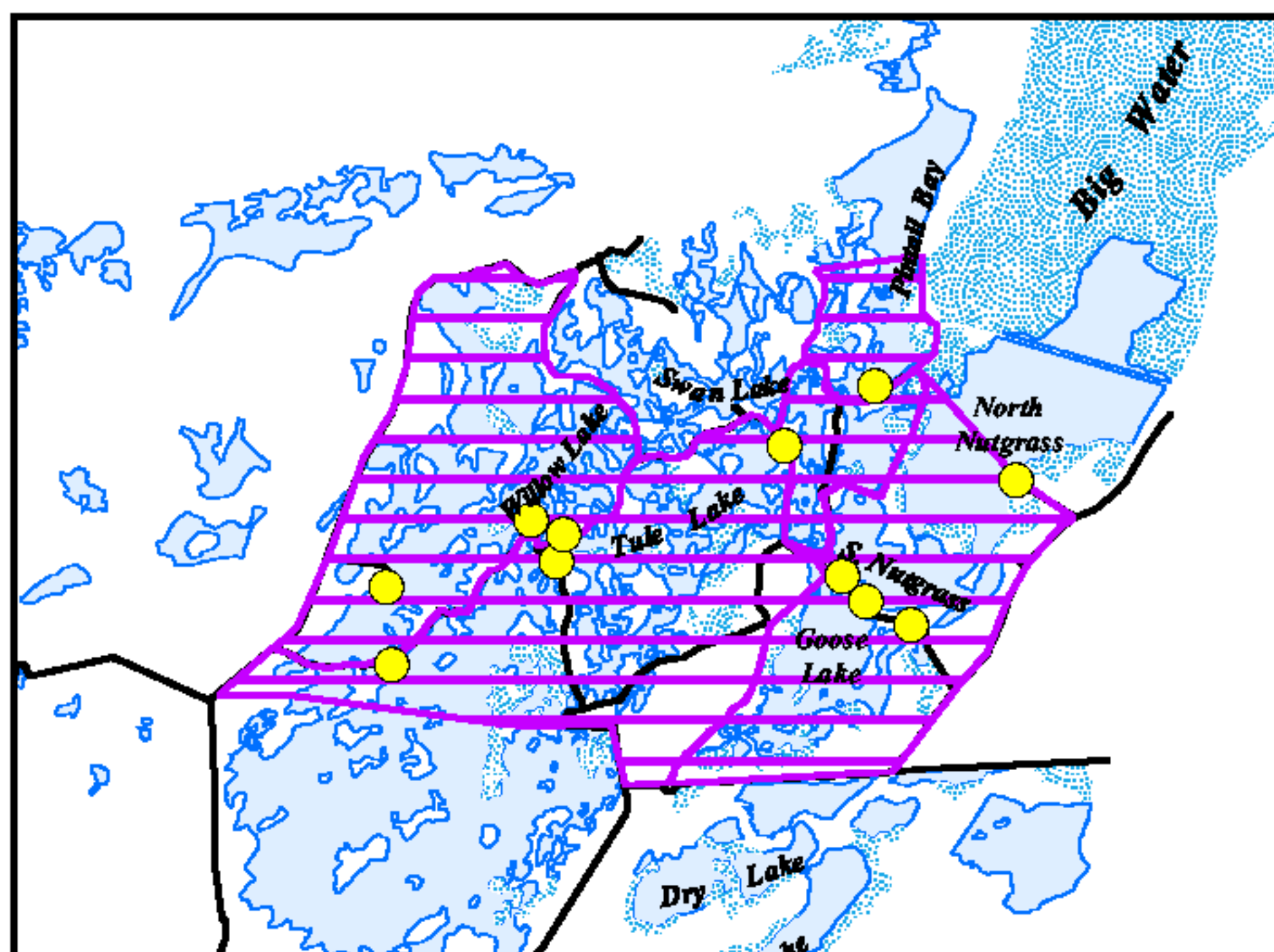




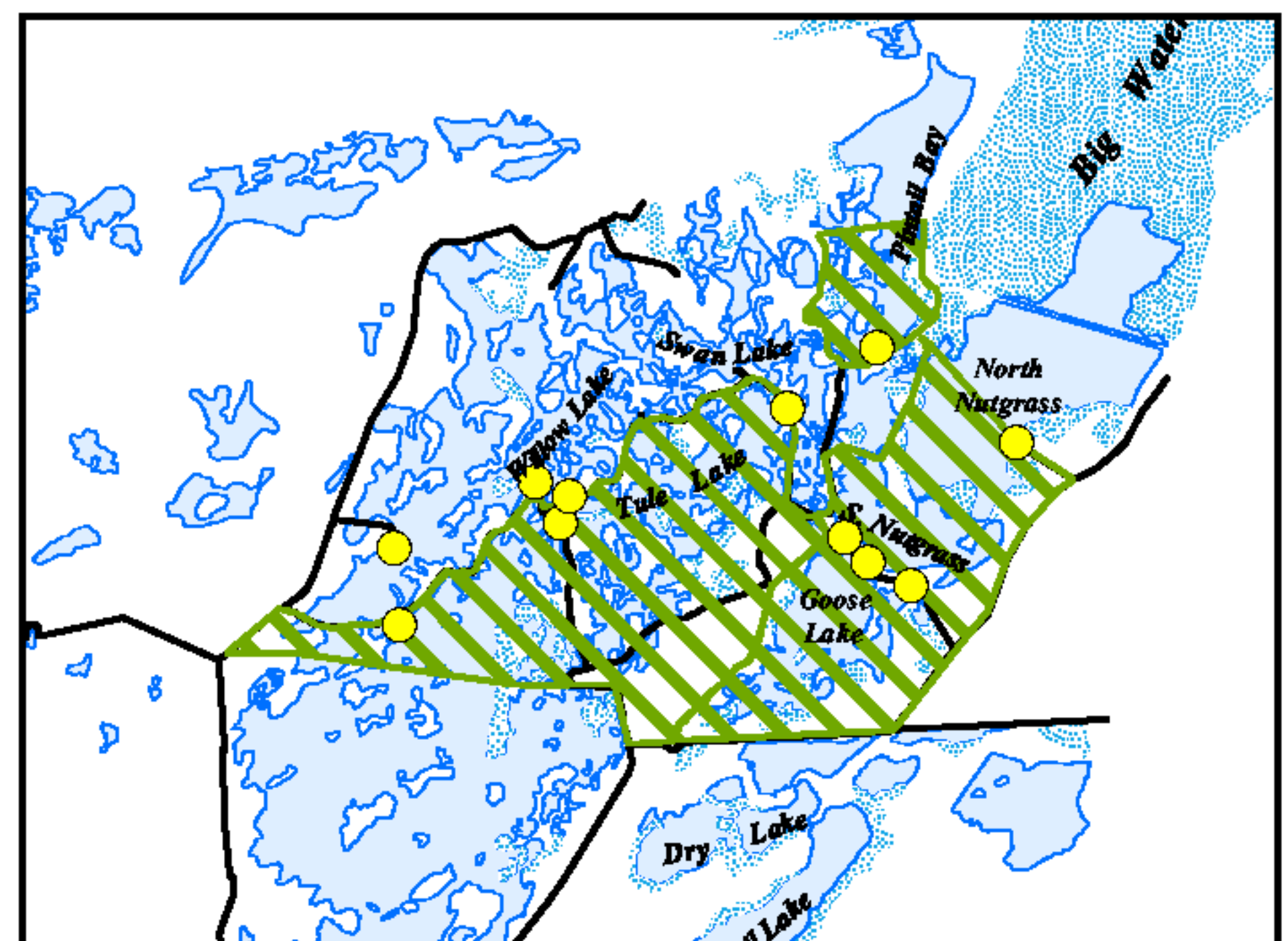
**Inset 1: Visitors Center and Tour Loop**



**Inset 2: No Boats**





**Inset 3: Non-motorized boats**






**Inset 4: Outboard Motor Boats**




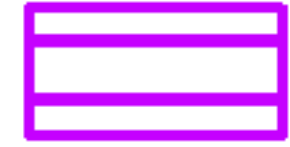
## Roads

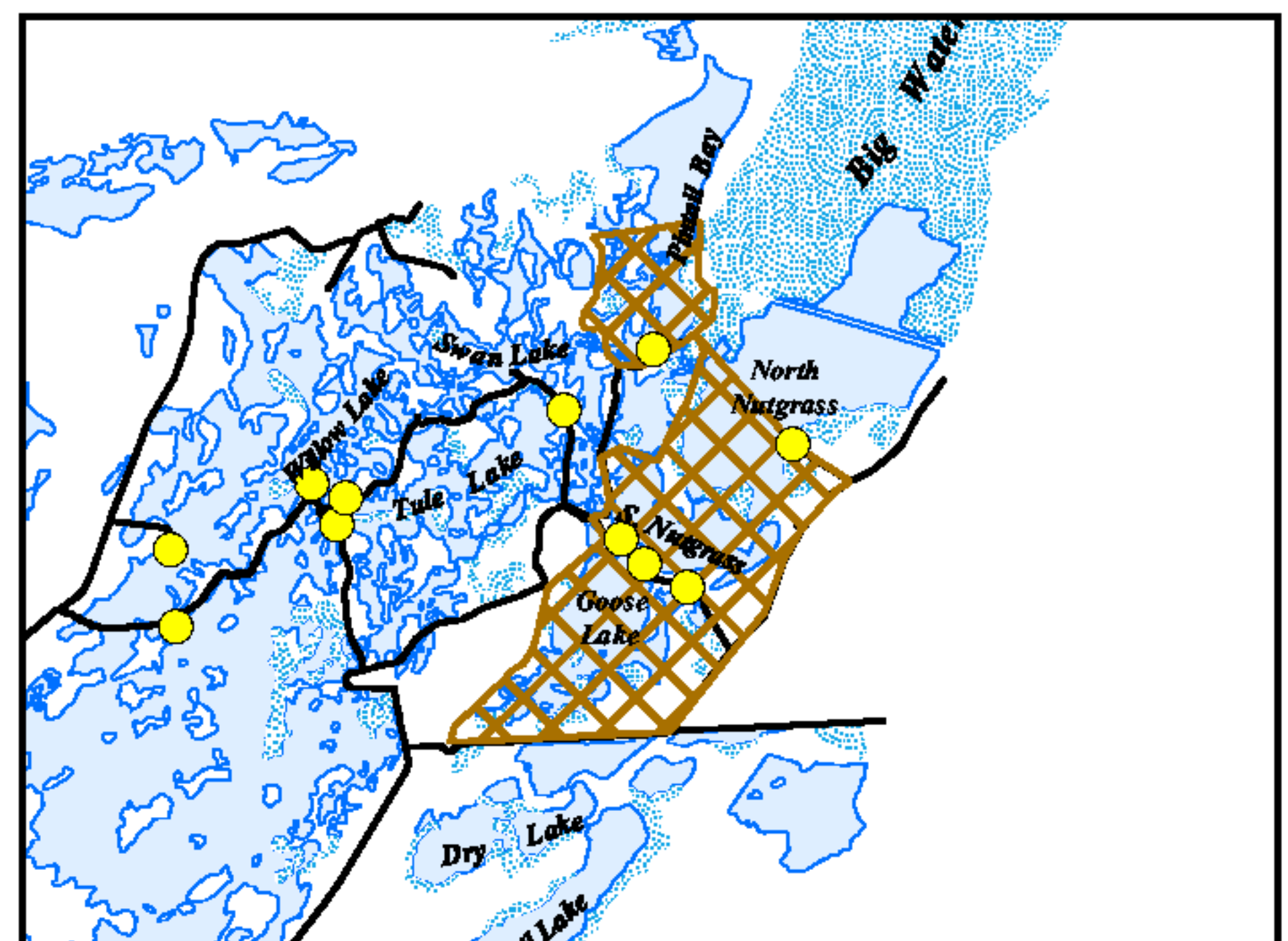
-  Refuge Roads
-  Tour Loop

## Public Use Facilities

-  Visitors Center
-  Observation Points
-  Boat Landings

## Boating Options

-  No Boats
-  Airthrust Boats
-  Outboard Boats
-  Non-motorized Boats



**Inset 5: Airthrust Boats**



The working group agreed that hunting should be allowed seven days per week under State designated hunting seasons, although alterations to this schedule should be allowed under the extreme conditions scenario outlined in the water management section of this planning update. The group also believed that NDOW and the Service should meet prior to July 15, annually, to discuss potential changes to hunting regulations resulting from extreme conditions or other unforeseen circumstances. The rationale was that changes submitted prior to July 15 could still be included in the State's regulation pamphlets. Where agreement between the Service and NDOW could not be reached, the Service should develop the final regulatory language.

Other suggestions included providing hunting for all migratory, upland, big game, and other unprotected species throughout the refuge boundary identified in the attached map, except within the designated sanctuary located south of Division Road, and other safety zones as identified in the Draft CCP-EIS. Hunting should be with shotgun using nontoxic shot, or archery equipment. Hunting for mule deer should be allowed during seasons for archery and muzzle-loaders as established by the Board of Wildlife Commissioners, for persons possessing archery or muzzle-loader tags for State Management Area 18. Hunting with any other weapons including, but not restricted to, rifles and pistols should not be allowed on the refuge.

The Service recommended that a hunter advisory group be established to discuss hunting management options. This group would meet twice annually, following the hunting season and again following the release of projected water supply information for the coming year (usually around May 1). This group would consist of Stillwater NWRC hunters to elicit feedback on hunting options that hunters liked, did not like, and potential options for future Service consideration. NDOW suggested that at least

one member of this group be a member of the Churchill County Advisory Group to Manage Wildlife, so that local concerns are represented.

The group reached agreement on this topic.

### **Waterfowl Hunting Access/Boating Options**

Under the Service proposed action, two units, Swan Lake and West Marsh, would be designated as walk-in only access, with boating access restricted to 15 hp or less outboard motors on remaining wetland units. Walk-in only designated units would allow a hunter to carry only what he or she can on their back into the unit. Airthrust boats (Airboats) would not be allowed on Stillwater NWR and one unit would be selected for nonmotorized boat access only. All boating would be restricted throughout the refuge outside of the waterfowl hunting season except on the designated nonmotorized boat unit which would be open to nonmotorized boating all year.

The working group discussed these options and suggested the following revisions. First, hunters using walk-in only/no boating units should be allowed to use nonmotorized carts and sleds to transport hunting gear and blind building materials only. Floating blinds, sleds, and other floating devices should be allowed on all units; however, in nonboating units, these devices may be used only to transport equipment and to conceal hunters.

Second, Swan Lake Check should be designated as a nonmotorized boating unit and a canoe trail should be established for year round wildlife observation. All other units should be closed to boat access other than during waterfowl hunting season.

Third, all boats including airthrust boats, and boats powered by outboard motors, should be allowed on designated units within Stillwater NWR, with no speed or decibel restrictions



initially imposed. If the Service determined, through monitoring, that wildlife disturbance was becoming excessive through this approach, speed, decibel, and/or engine size restrictions could be used to alleviate impacts. The following unit access designations were provided by the working group:

No Boats - Swan Lake, the north end of Pintail Bay, and the northeast corner of North Nutgrass (Map Inset 2).

Nonmotorized Boats - Swan Lake Check, West Nutgrass, West Marsh, and all units open to boating (Map Inset 3).

Motorized Boats except airthrust boats - Lead Lake, Tule Lake, Goose Lake, South Nutgrass, the open portion of North Nutgrass, and the open portion of Pintail Bay (Map Inset 4).

Airthrust Boats - Goose Lake, South Nutgrass, the open portion of North Nutgrass, and the open portion of Pintail Bay (Map Inset 5).

Use of airthrust boats should require a special use permit issued by Stillwater NWRC with conditions including that boats are marked with a large, unique identifier on the tail rudder. Interference with other hunters or violations of State or Federal regulations would result in revocation of the permit.

Finally, the group suggested that an additional boat landing be created at the northeast corner of North Tule Lake to minimize boat disturbance to wildlife. At present, boats must launch at the northwest corner and traverse the entire unit to hunt the east side. The group believes that this additional ramp will reduce the amount of boat traffic and reduce possible wildlife impacts while providing better hunting conditions.

The group reached agreement on this topic.

## **Predator Management**

In the Draft CCP-EIS, the Service recognizes predators as a natural element of a healthy ecosystem. However, the Service also recognizes that some predator populations have possibly expanded beyond natural levels due to physical alterations to the natural system. Therefore, the Service proposed that predator control be included as a management tool when it can be shown that these populations are higher than turn of the century populations, when sensitive species nesting populations are at risk, and/or when other management tools are unavailable to achieve desired habitat and population objectives.

Because some working group members did not agree with a predator control policy at any level, it was suggested that the Service prepare an Environmental Assessment for any predator control plan.

Additionally, the Service should conduct public scoping to explain proposed predator control activities and to solicit public feedback. In situations where the Service must act quickly, such as with sensitive species populations, the group agreed that the Service could implement predator control; however, they wanted adequate public notification to accompany any action.

## **Management of the Lahontan Valley Wetlands as a Habitat Complex**

On a final note, the group believes that the Service and NDOW need to work together on a local basis to coordinate wetland management activities. The purpose of this cooperation should be to discuss annual water use plans, including delivery schedules, management objectives for wetland units within primary wetland habitat areas, and cooperative efforts to provide the best habitat potential to meet the requirements outlined in Public Law 101-618 for each respective area.

## **NDOW Working Group Summary**

We sincerely thank all participants in the NDOW Working Group for the time spent constructively reviewing their comments from the Draft CCP-EIS and for their willingness to allow Service personnel to explain what was in the document, why we had written sections the way we had, and to clarify misconceptions about document content. We would especially like to thank Rich Heap (NDOW) for his leadership and facilitation during some very long and often contentious working group sessions, and for his ability to bring people into these sessions which represented a cross-section of the commenting public. It is a pleasure to again have a spirit of cooperation as we approach the bottom line - effectively managing the Lahontan Valley Wetlands.

### **Consultation With the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe**

The Service has also been consulting with the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe and discussing the comments they submitted on the Draft CCP-EIS. Issues discussed are primarily related to Stillwater NWRC water delivery schedules and the possible effects these schedules might have on Truckee River resources and Pyramid Lake. The primary tribal concern is that any alteration to the agricultural delivery pattern, which is the basis of water diversion equations used to determine the amount of water diverted from the Truckee River to Lahontan Reservoir under the 1997 adjusted Newlands Project Operating Criteria and Procedures (OCAP), has the potential to impact the endangered cui-ui and the threatened Lahontan cutthroat trout. The Service has proposed to take more water in the spring in preferred Alternative C to fulfill the intent of refuge purposes outlined in Public Law 101-618 (e.g., restore and maintain natural biological diversity within the refuge).

In conjunction with the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe consultations, the Service has been meeting with the Bureau of Reclamation to discuss refuge water management as it relates to

the 1997 adjusted OCAP. These meetings are ongoing and have required some additional effort by planning staff to analyze potential effects from water management.

Also, refuge staff have been meeting with Fish and Wildlife Service endangered species staff to complete consultation requirements under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act and to determine whether refuge management actions will have any impact on Truckee River threatened (Lahontan cutthroat trout) and endangered species (cui-ui). Cui-ui require a flow rate of 1000 cubic feet per second at the Truckee River delta from March through May to initiate and provide the conditions necessary for cui-ui to spawn. During June, the primary consideration is egg survival, and flows in excess of 2,500 cfs have the potential to reduce cui-ui survival.

Conversely, Lahontan cutthroat trout require minimum summer and fall flows, yet to be determined by the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe and the Service, to provide river water quality conditions suitable for their survival. These fish spawn in early winter with other, yet to be determined, minimum river conditions required for spawning. The Service's decision to recover Lahontan cutthroat trout in the Truckee River means that refuge water management strategies must consider year round influences on these fish populations. The Water Rights Acquisition Program EIS only addressed impacts of spring flows to cui-ui.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

It has been over a year since we released the Draft Stillwater NWRC CCP and boundary revision EIS for public review, and refuge planning staff have been busy meeting with various comment contributors, responding to the comments received, and communicating with the parties potentially affected by implementation of the CCP-EIS. Many hours of staff time have gone toward preparing materials for these

meetings and to analyzing effects more thoroughly. Thus, CCP-EIS revisions are proceeding slowly as we move toward release of the final document

write to the above address or call to be added to the CCP mailing list.

The upside is that we have been able to meet with as many of you as possible, and in most cases, have been able to truly understand the perspective you have voiced in your comments to the Draft CCP-EIS. We hope that you better understand our perspective as well. The end result of this long process should be a Stillwater NWRC CCP that all can support.

We intend to finalize our meetings over the next couple of months, and consider the comments we have received and discussed to develop the Final CCP-EIS. We cannot give you a projected date for Final EIS and ROD completion at this point, but we can assure you that we have tried to hear, understand, and consider your concerns, and this has been the most beneficial part of this process.

The Service appreciates the opportunity to address and respond to the comments submitted during the public review process and we are willing to attend meetings or functions we are invited to. We are also available to answer your questions over the phone or by e-mail. If you wish for us to attend a meeting or function, please contact:

**Project Leader Kim Hanson**  
**Stillwater NWR Complex**  
**1000 Auction Rd.**  
**Fallon NV 89406**  
**(775) 423-5128**  
**kim\_hanson@fws.gov**

To avoid scheduling conflicts please give us at least three weeks prior notice.

Please pass this planning update along to anyone that you think may be interested in the CCP process. For those interested, please have them



**Information you will find in Planning Update #7 about  
the Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge  
Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Boundary  
Revision:**

<b>Greetings .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Where We've Been .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Refuge News .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2001 Spring Wings Bird Festival .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2001 Hunting Season .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>How Your Comments Are Being Incorporated in the Final EIS .....</b>	<b>2</b>

<b>Nevada Division of Wildlife Working Group</b>	<b>2</b>
Stillwater NWRC Boundary .....	2
Water Management .....	3
Non-Consumptive Use Management .....	4
Consumptive Use Management .....	4
Trapping .....	4
Fishing .....	5
Hunting .....	5
Access/Boating Options .....	8
Predator Management .....	9
Management of the Lahontan Valley Wetlands as a Habitat Complex .....	10
NDOW Working Group Summary .....	10

<b>Consultation with the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Where Do We Go From Here .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Future Planning Activities .....</b>	<b>11</b>

U.S. Department of Interior  
Fish and Wildlife Service  
Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge  
P.O. Box 1236  
Fallon, Nevada 89407

**OFFICIAL BUSINESS  
PENALTY FOR PRIVATE USE, \$300**